

IDEOLOGY OF SWADESHI' ART

(Art's] rebirth in India today can only take place, if it be consciously made the servant and poet of the mighty dream of an Indian Nationality. For the same reason, there is little or nothing in England now that can be called Art. An imperialised people have nothing to struggle for, and without the struggle upwards there can be no great genius, no great poetry.

Sister Nivedita, *Modern Review*, 1907 THE

BACKGROUND

The Raj and the essence of Hinduism

Balendranath's death coincided with the turning point in nationalist art, as his criticism of Ravi Varma foretold the end of the age of optimism. A conjunction of forces - disenchantment with western education, a renewed confidence in Hindu civilisation, and a changing outlook on progress and its artistic expression, academic naturalism helped to define the specific character of Indian art, a non-Classical tradition. The ensuing *swadeshi* (indigenous) ideology of art thrived on the dichotomy between the 'spiritual' East and the 'materialist' West.

In 1835, during the debate on education for Indians, Macaulay, who spoke of creating 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', epitomised the high tide of westernisation.¹ In 1857 such confidence perished on the dusty plains of Meerut and Lucknow. Exclusion rather than assimilation became the keynote; a cautious and contained intervention became the administrative policy.

Ideas of race, hierarchy and evolution replaced the Enlightenment ideas of Macaulay, Bentham and Mill. Their writings had ranked societies on a scale of social progress but had not deemed the 'backwardness' of non-Europeans as inherent. Racial determinists of the later period ascribed such lack of progress to the 'personality' of each racial group, an idea that sought confirmation in the Aryan myth. The Hindus had made

some gains from the myth which had conferred the status of western *Urheimat* on ancient Indian society. However, if the Raj was forced to concede racial affinities between the Hindus and the British, it was reassured that the Indian Aryans had remained in a time warp. This had far-reaching implications for colonial policy.² Previously, Hindu backwardness was seen as the outcome of climate or institutions; now government measures were predicated on the inborn and unalterable differences between the British and the Indian character.

As a reflection of racial psychology, Indian art was simply incompatible with European naturalism, with progress as its mainspring. Birdwood, an ardent advocate of the idea, also happened to dislike industrial Britain and to admire Indian arts as the product of an ideal pre-industrial community. High officials listened carefully to Birdwood when legislating on art education, but the wake of the first major political upheaval in 1905, the Raj became an ardent advocate of 'authentic' Indian art, abandoning westernisers to their fate. Renaissance naturalism simply went against the grain of Indian culture. Instead, a flat, linear artistic style was identified with the essence of Hindu India. Whereas previously the 'native artist' enjoyed a low but secure place within academic art, he was now excluded altogether. On the other hand, such exclusion of Indian art was taken over by nationalists when they set out to assert their cultural identity; the innate differences between Indians and Europeans expressed different artistic spin-offs. In short, the phoenix of nationalist art rose on the ashes of the Victorian adage: Indian art was the highest form of decoration.¹

Artists entered the political arena in 1905, the year that Bengal was partitioned at Curzon's behest. The *Swadeshi* movement spearheaded this first widespread unrest in India with a demand for *swaraj* (self-rule), and their chosen weapon was *swadeshi* (indigenism). *Swadeshi* was economic war against the Raj on two fronts: boycotting British goods while promoting indigenous manufactures.⁴ The call for self-reliance spilled over into the domain of art, encouraging artists to use it as a political weapon. Cultural autonomy complemented economic self-sufficiency. Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* (Fig. XXI), his only painting with an overt political message, was produced during the era of *swadeshi* unrest. In 1912, *The Dawn Magazine*, a leading nationalist weekly, explained the reason for the political involvement of artists:

One of the most remarkable though less pronounced features in our present-day public life is the steady growth of a number of movements, literary, historical and artistic, which represent a distinct phase of the working of the Indian mind in favour of what in the absence of a better name may be styled non-political Indian nationalism. In Bengal, the literary and historical movement [for reviving] old Indian, and especially old Bengali history and literature . . . has succeeded . . . in directing our countrymen towards the relics . . . of our past . . . Another phase of the same movement in favour of a non-political Indian nationalism, is the artistic [one] . . .

The creation of Hindu identity

In the nineteenth century, cultural nationalism was the order of the day. There are striking parallels in the growth of cultural nationalism between India, Ireland and East Europe in the way their national self-images were created through a shared culture. As in India, Slav nationalists were divided by language, culture and religion. The first stirrings of Slav nationalism, as in India (especially Bengal), were articulated in literary works.⁶ But cultural nationalism in Asia, as for example in India, was also the response of traditional societies to the challenge of modernism. Empires have existed since the dawn of history; yet European colonial empires were unique in facing nationalist resistance almost from their inception. Unlike earlier military or bureaucratic empires, colonialism came at a time when Europe herself was undergoing social transformation. These forces of change, and their ideological mainstay, the notion of progress, put enormous pressures on non-European societies, undermining their stability and yet offering them a powerful means of resistance. The doctrine that national aspirations could be fulfilled solely through self-determination, was swiftly assimilated by the western-educated in Asian countries."

Colonial regimes were often directly responsible for the spread of western literacy among the indigenous elite. Macaulay put the case of the Raj with admirable candour: rather than being a case of altruism, it was to form a class of interpreters between us and the millions we govern ... [to] that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects... with terms of science borrowed from the [West]. .. and to render them ... fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population'.⁸ The *bhadralok* took full advantage of 'English' education, overtaking others as chief purveyors of western learning in Bengal; but they were also bilingual, their mother-tongue being Bengali. Colonial rule created the conditions for the reform of Bengali, hitherto a vehicle for poetry and traditional disciplines such as deductive logic. English missionaries introduced a standard Bengali script, a unified language and printing technology. Bengali was offered a new lease of life, making it capable of producing objective discourses, not to mention novels and short stories. The impressive output of the Bengal Renaissance bears witness to, the ease with which western literary modes were made to serve indigenous ideas.

A remarkable product of this interaction was Bankim Chatterjee. Not only did he pen numerous essays in Bengali in which European political and social doctrines were held under his critical scrutiny, he even used the novel as a form of discourse. His *Kapalkundala* charts the tragic fate of Rousseau's 'natural man' in society (the actual character in the novel is a woman). In short, the colonial: renewal of Bengali— the, first such modernisation of an Indian language - allows us to study the ..complex interface of tradition and change. The Bengali elite stood in a curious

position here. European Enlightenment committed them to cosmopolitan values; but the same ideas also heightened their national identity. Printing technology played a crucial part, not merely in the growth of vernacular languages; it helped to spread political consciousness. The readership, invisibly linked through print, formed 'the embryo of the nationally-imagined community', as it was no longer confined to a region."

A shared literary language conferred an identity on the *bhadralok* and a confidence to exclude those who did not have access to it. The *bhadralok* also cultivated a spoken language that set them further apart from the *chhotolok* of the unrefined tongue. In India, as in Russia and the Balkan countries, the quest for national identity followed westernisation; this identity in its turn focused on vernacular literature. In short, linguistic revivals led to cultural renaissances, preceding the demand for national independence. The colonial intelligentsia did not fail to be moved by the heroism of William Tell or the self-sacrifice of Joan of Arc. But they also saw their own bondage mirrored in these stirring tales."

During the Bengal Renaissance, the link between language and identity was spelt out by a nationalist:

Indeed we can hardly conceive a more glorious object, a more sublime spectacle, than a nation . . . , who could form and highly refine a language, write elaborate works on its grammars and compose hymns and prayers while their brethren in other parts of the world could hardly think it possible to represent the elementary sounds in their speech by visible characters.¹²

Imagining Aryan ancestors

This paeon to ancestral language refers, not to Bengali but to the Aryan *Ursprache* Sanskrit, the European discovery of which fed into the modern Hindu's image of his past. National 'pride' remains the most potent sentiment of our age, as it articulates the social, economic and political aspirations of a community. As human beings we need to belong, and we are members of different groups, of involuntary ones such as class and gender, and of elective ones such as professions or clubs. Of these, the most powerful feelings of belonging are stirred in us by the myth of common descent. In the last century, in the wake of wide literacy and printing technology, the national 'will' ousted earlier collective nations. One need not go as far as Kedourie to say that 'nationalism' is a fabrication of the native intelligentsia to coalesce at foreign rule; but it is an invented tradition to the extent that it 'automatically implies a continuity with the past' Far from being spontaneous and timeless, the authentic pedigree for the nation is manufactured by a selective reading of the past, ruthlessly suppressing aspects that are incompatible with the aspirations of the

dominant group. In India with its motley of castes, classes, languages, regions and religions, no community can claim an exclusive inheritance. Thus the nationalist image of 'a homogeneous Hindu past' was by implication a term of exclusion.¹⁴

In 1902—3, *The Dawn Magazine* was jubilant that European waiters from William Jones to Birdwood had 'established beyond all doubt the fact that Indian art, literature, science and philosophy - all belong to a remote past'.¹⁵ This appeal to history exposed a desperate necessity in colonial Bengal. In the early nineteenth century, Hindu 'backwardness' was drummed into the English-educated by Evangelists and Utilitarians. In mid-century, the English public-school cult of manliness and the Darwinian doctrine of the fittest painfully reminded Bengalis of their physical slightness. Moreover, Raj paternalism preferred the 'martial races' of the north-west to the educated Bengali. The bhadralok had gone for 'a larger slice of the imperial cake', with the ensuing threat to the English ruling class. Kipling's 'cowardly' ICS baboo was seen as being incapable of exercising authority even when allowed to do

English, the conduit to modern knowledge, was also the language of the foreign rulers. Access to it did not guarantee social acceptance, for after all, even within Britain, language reinforced class distinctions. Since western values were the measure against which the colonised was evaluated, if he was unable to absorb them he was a failure; if on the other hand he was too successful, he was accused of aping his overlords.¹⁷ The artist Valentine Prinsep's favourite term for a quaint Indian was 'baboo'. Such contempt created an acute ambivalence in the bhadralok, who took to heart the stereotype of the effete Bengali. The cause of his infirmity was traced to racial degeneration, which of course was the particular Bengali expression of a global anxiety. The Hindu Mela organised gymnastics to improve Bengali physique. The slide of Bengal politics into terrorism, as in Ireland, can be largely ascribed to widespread racial condescension.¹⁸

The Bengal Renaissance in the sense of cultural regeneration required its golden age in order to assuage a feeling of inadequacy. Nothing boosted budding nationalism more than an appeal to the past. Western thinkers viewed history not only as the collective memory of a nation, but also as investing with legitimacy its present actions. 'A nation without history, without antecedents, without character, must begin to build its good name on a surer foundation, than a silly imitation of.....their superiors', admonished Delhi *Sketch Book* in connection with a duel fought by two Indians. It was to challenge such British stereotype that the early nationalist Surendranath Banerjee addressed a public meeting in Calcutta: 'miserable and degraded as we are, our degradation has followed upon a chain of sequences', but history demonstrated that there still remained relics of past greatness, that the Hindus were not only great in literature and science but in war as well. Rebutting the charge that Hindus were an unhistorical nation, Banerjee insisted that all ancient

records had perished in India. He exhorted his audience to take up history writing in order to present an accurate picture of past Hindu greatness, instead of acquiescing in British distortions. 'Is it still possible to recover the history of ancient Bengal?', asked the novelist Bankim Chatterjee, 'surely it is not impossible. But few Bengalis have that capability. Whether a Bengali or an Englishman the man who was most qualified for this task did not feel like undertaking it'.¹ Bankim's regret was directed at the historian Rajendralala Mitra.

From Bengali to Hindu nationalism

During the Bengal Renaissance, the nationalist impulse was at first local. Playwrights, novelists and poets in their search for early patriots unearthed heroes half-remembered in popular legends who had resisted 'foreign' rule. Shiraj ud-Daulah, the last Mughal viceroy of Bengal, was portrayed in at least one famous play as the first patriot and tragic victim of British perfidy. Although Shiraj was invested with a consciousness he did not possess, he was able to fulfil the assigned historical function. The net was gradually cast outside Bengal to bring in other, Hindu rulers who had confronted foreign invaders, notably the Rajput Rana Pratap and the Maratha Shivaji.²⁰

When the Bengali elite discovered Hindu patriots of the past from outside Bengal, they reflected an expansion of the nationalist horizon. If earlier on, Bengali nationalists had acted as surrogates for other Indians, now the Hindus spoke for the whole of India. Not that Hindu consciousness did not exist before the last century, but that identity was fragmented and contingent upon caste and regional affiliations. Moreover, to take the case of Bengal, though its original population was Hindu, it had absorbed many Muslim social and cultural practices during long Muslim rule. But the emerging nationalism in the 1860s threw Hindu identity into sharp relief, while conditions for its self-assertion were being created in Orientalist literature. Thus even as the bhadraik viewed themselves as the original inhabitants of the subcontinent, Bengali nationalism was not abandoned; it simply flowed into a wider Hindu nationalism.²¹

Hindus never lost a high opinion of their ancient culture, but missionary criticisms put them on the defensive. The turning point was Max Muller's critical edition of the *Rig Veda* (1845-79), which confirmed the pre-eminence of this early-Aryan text in world literature. Building upon the foundations of Jones, Wilkins and Colebrooke, Müller's research restored Hindu confidence, offering them a new perception of the Vedas. Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, appealed exclusively to these hymns as the sole repository of Hindu wisdom. He had little English but is said to have always carried Müller's volume with

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him. Müller himself was satisfied with his recovery of Vedic India though he faced the hostility of European scholars, a reconstruction with which Hindu nationalists identified. No wonder all India mourned his death, as the Parsi reformer Behramji Malabari recorded

Other minor Orientalists were no less influential. Edwin Arnold wrote a highly romantic biography of the Buddha. An upholder of the imperial idea, Arnold represented the Buddha as the founder of a spiritual empire, a sentiment that attracted Indian nationalists. By the end of the Century materials for exalting India's past were available not only in the West but also to English-educated Indians: Sacred Books of the East series, Trübner's Oriental Series, the Harvard Oriental Series, translations of Indian classics and publications of the Archaeological Survey of India. In the early nineteenth century, while rejecting missionary charges of Hindu backwardness, the Indian elite sought to remove what they regarded as socially reprehensible practices. The more extreme among them, the Young Bengal, a radical westernising group (see ch. 8, p. 269), for instance, renounced tradition *in toto*, turning to Europe in desperation. And yet by the second half of the century even reactionary practices were sought to be accommodated, so radically had the situation changed.²³

Reading early Indian nationalists, it is all too easy to form the impression that their claims were no more than, the neurotic self-reassurance of a subject people. It is well therefore to recall the reputation that India enjoyed in western Romanticism. European discovery of Sanskrit in the late eighteenth century, argues Raymond Schwab, led to a renaissance comparable in its impact to the sixteenth century one I alluded to the Bengali author's pride in Sanskrit, the Aryan *Ursprache*. Herder, the leading exponent of linguistic nationalism, was also an adherent of the Aryan myth and of India as the 'Magna Mater' of western civilisation. Such Romantic adulation was naturally crucial in the making of the Hindu motherland, counteracting the colonial badge of inferiority.²⁴

Colonialism and cultural authenticity

The search for the Hindu heritage became a burning issue among cultural nationalists. Srimani's regret that the lack of sources prevented the writing of a true history of Indian art was a sign of the times. Ravi Varma had heeded Clio's call in his efforts to revive ancient culture. Artistic revivals were not unique to India however; they are a modern phenomenon. Romantic sensibility invested the past with a new meaning, making us aware of its essential alienness - that it was a foreign country', which could and must be studied with detachment. This 'objectification' of the past was sanctified by archaeology. The difference between the Renaissance and Romanticism is instructive here. The Humanists treated the

Classical tradition as an unbroken continuum stretching right back to antiquity. The eighteenth century no longer perceived this link, as it celebrated the rupture of consciousness with a fresh look at history. --Imagining' the past assumed an urgency, for it conferred legitimacy on national aspirations. But paradoxically, the more decisive the break with the past, the more its modern restorers asserted its continuity. Yet, in the industrial age, for all practical purposes, tradition as historic continuity was dead.²⁸

The impetus for recovering India's past did not initially come from Indians; there was no special need to make a self-conscious appeal to history. For eighteenth-century India, at its moment of colonisation, was still traditional, and the link between the past and the present still intact. Moreover, since there was no central agency to chronicle the past, earlier periods gradually faded from memory. But for the East India Company, dredging up India's past was of the utmost importance. As B. S. Cohn argues, 'The major interpretative strategy i which India was to become known to Europeans in the 17th and 18th century was through a construction of a "history" of India'.²⁶ Knowledge was surely the secret of efficient control. In addition to Max Miiller's Vedic studies, British archaeologists Prinsep and Cunningham and Indian historians Rajen-dralala Mitra and R. G. Bhandarkar provided the missing pieces in the jigsaw of Indian history.

The new image of 'Hindu' India offered the alluring prospect of historical continuity and cultural unity, ignoring significant breaks. As the past was consolidated and codified, its 'pure' essence was held up against 'hybrid' colonial culture. It is obvious that the achievements of the Bengal Renaissance were the result of colonial interaction. And yet, as the western-educated faced repeated British taunts as hybrids, as opposed to 'traditional' Indians, defining and upholding the 'authentic' tradition became a matter of self-respect for them. Celebrating the newly-won confidence, the *swadeshi* ideology imagined the Hindus as the exclusive inheritors of India's past. Thus the somewhat unexpected gift of colonialism was the Orientalist image of a Hindu community that cut across caste, language and region. This in effect disinherited other Indians, notably the Muslims. Bankim, for instance, in some of his popular novels portrayed Muslim rulers as 'aliens', from whom 'authentic' Hindu civilisation had to be rescued. It would be simplistic not to recognise that, as a colonial administrator, Bankim's opposition to the Raj was disguised in political allegory. His most influential novel, *Anandamath*, was correctly read by Bengali nationalists as resistance to British rule and not to past Muslim rulers. Unsurprisingly, Aurobindo Ghosh's revolutionary tract, *Bhawani Mandir*, drew inspiration from it. Notwithstanding, Bankim himself was not always immune to the charge of equating the Hindu nation with the Indian.²⁷

Authenticity was bound to figure prominently in cultural expressions,

namely, art and literature. One is not absolutely sure why vernacular literature resolved the issue more successfully. As Whorf argues in another context, it may be that language creates its own world-image. The modern novel and other literary imports were quickly and efficiently put to indigenous usage. Bengali novels were entirely successful in capturing local experiences and expressions. The bilingual bhadralok soon learned to avoid creative writing in English. After his unsuccessful novel in English, Bankim channelled his entire energy into Bengali. The foremost nineteenth-century poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, too, learnt from his mistake and left his finest works in the vernacular. The supreme achievement of this colonial process was Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's originality was internationally acknowledged even though he made no secret of the fact that he often turned to English Romantic poets for inspiration. The last flowering of the Bengal Renaissance as a synthesis of East and West was seen in the great film director, Satyajit Ray (1921-92).

Sculpture and painting were altogether different, precisely because they appeared to the Victorians to obey self-evident 'canons of taste'. Yet these canons were those of mimetic art seen through Victorian eyes, which added two further conditions: a lofty moral purpose and the propensity to progress. In literature no comparable canon enjoyed this universality. The reason may lie in the fact that, except in France, there did not exist a universal 'neoclassical' canon to appeal to. The English, Celtic and German literature could not, for the most part, be assimilated to a single Classical tradition. Indeed, they grew up partly in repudiation of it, or at least the dominant French version of it. Rabindranath's unique western success can be partially ascribed to the absence of such a canon. The norms of Sanskrit literature were alien to European sensibility, and yet they did not fail to appeal to the Romantic imagination.²⁹

Art on the other hand was ideologically 'loaded' from the start. Although Abanindranath is accepted today as the first painter to restore the national heritage, the pioneer in this was Ravi Varma. However, as academic art was closely identified with imperial triumphalism, an 'authentic' national expression could not be tainted by being associated with the Raj. Since Victorians denied the fine arts to India, accepting their artistic canon compromised the nationalist. Abanindranath's generation rejected Varma's historicism as an inadequate guarantee of authenticity, and staked its own claim on the revival of indigenous artistic styles.

The quest for an authentic style joined hands with the new Hindu identity - unified, timeless, and ahistorical - in the creation of a nationalist myth. From this perspective, culture was not an evolving process; so art too must exude a pristine essence, my deviation from which was demeaning. Yet, the evolution of any art form, not to mention Indian, show; that its strength lies not in sterile aloofness but in its ability to absorb new influences. One does not ask if Mughal painting was pure or hybrid

simply because it absorbed European Mannerism. However, there is a more serious issue here. The moral panic felt by colonial artists in their search for cultural authenticity exposes the self-conscious nature of that search. As in modern Europe, the historicist revival of an 'authentic tradition' in India was a symptom of its loss. Significantly, the quest for authenticity did not begin in India until traditional art had virtually disappeared. Moreover, if one takes the Patna School of the last century, these artists were not unduly worried that borrowing from the West would compromise their Indianness.³¹ Still in a living tradition, they were not conscious of the syndrome of cultural purity. Even in the nationalist era, the distinction between the highly self-conscious 'indigenous' art of the elite and the unselfconscious popular art such as prints that did not eschew European ideas was noticeable.

The global search for Utopia

The *swadeshi* nationalists who sought to free Indian art from the Classical contagion found unexpected allies in romantic rebels against progress. The greatest critics of the Industrial Revolution were Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris in the last century, as Gandhi was to be in ours. But the primitivist longing for a harmonious pre-industrial community was widely diffused. What held the assemblage of Russian Slavophiles, European Theosophists, Japanese and Indian Pan-Asianists, the leaders of the Irish Literary Revival and members of the Arts and Crafts Movement together was their opposition to western rationality, industrial society and academic illusionism.

Friendships were struck up between unlikely individuals, alliances formed and international networks built to make common cause against industrial capitalism. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, the crusade against western materialism, set up the society's headquarters near Madras. Her family knew the Slavophile Aksakovs. Her Theosophist successor, Annie Besant, became an Indian nationalist. Madame Blavatsky's compatriot the mystic painter Nicholas Roerich, made his home in India. In 1885 the leading figures in the Irish Literary Movement, George Russell (A.E.), W. B. Yeats, T. W. Rolleston and John Egglirigton, became members of the Dublin Theosophical Lodge. The Irish Revival joined hands with Theosophy during the heyday of Aryanism, as the [tic *avatar* became the avenger of the oppressed Irish. Yeats's friend Charles Johnston went out to India; the Irish poet owed his discovery of Hinduism to Mohini Chatterjee, the Bengali disciple of Madame Blavatsky. A. P. Sinnet, Theosophist author of *Esoteric Buddhism*, was a mentor of the group. During the time Yeats was part of Rolleston's Irish Literary Society in London, he introduced Tagore to the West and supported his Nobel Laureateship. Russell and Rolleston signed

the celebrated letter to *The Times* in protest at Birdwood's disparagement of Indian art.³²

Two other signatories, Walter Crane and W. B. Lethaby, were members of the English Arts and Crafts Movement, as was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, a key figure in the revival of Indian art. His *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908) was published by Morns' Kelmscott Press. The American inspirer of artistic revival in Japan was Ernest Fenollosa as Havell was in India. On his visit to Boston, Vivekananda met Fenollosa, and they exchanged ideas on the cultural unity of Asia. Fenollosa's Japanese disciple Okakura completed his Pan-Asianist document *The Ideals of the East* while staying with the Tagores in Calcutta. He was expected to meet Coomaraswamy on his visit to London. The introduction to *The Ideals* was by Vivekananda's disciple, Sister Nivedita, an Irishwoman. The Irishman, James Cousins, secretary to the Theosophical Society in Madras, took up the cause of Indian art around 1915.³³ The list could go on.

The global language of resistance was a late child of Romanticism, but transfigured in the Asian context. Asian nationalism, we have seen, represented economically 'backward' countries facing the challenge of industrial progress. Country after country in Asia adopted a new weapon to combat accusations of inferiority; they claimed that their difference with the dominant West lay in their spirituality. Material weakness was turned into a virtue by Asian nationalists, for it enabled them to resist the evils of technological progress. This nationalist rhetoric is not unfamiliar. It is startling however to read in Yeats that 'the spiritual history of the world has been the history of the conquered races',³⁴ an assertion which lay at the heart of Irish nationalism. The idea that defeat conferred a spiritual strength superior to the conqueror's materialism was also attractive to eastern thinkers: witness Mahatma Gandhi's forging of a political weapon out of physical frailty.

Significantly, Yeats, like Asian writers, denounced urban life as evil. And it was not merely among the politically weak that this doctrine exerted its fascination. Its most forceful advocates were in Britain, the home of the Industrial Revolution. The century that introduced unprecedented economic advances, also witnessed problems of unplanned growth. It was a 'bleak age', an age of overpopulation, grave Unrest and social deprivation; it was also an age that gave rise to prophets. While Carlyle thundered against the soulless machine, Ruskin excoriated industrial society, offering in its place an ideal rural community that blended aesthetic and moral values. Birdwood's idealisation of the Indian village was Ruskinian in spirit. Among visions of anti-industrial Utopia, none was more persuasive than Morris' *News From Nowhere*, set in the future. To Morris, no less than to Ruskin, the Age of Chivalry was infinitely preferable to the alienation of industrial conurbations.³⁸

Of the enemies of Victorian values, few were as colourful as Theosophists (founded 1875), whose anti-materialist potion was made up of equal

parts of universal brotherhood, comparative religion, the occult, and a large dose of the Indian doctrine of reincarnation. Its joint founders, the Russian Helena Blavatsky and the American H. S. Olcott, duly located 'the light from the East' on the banks of the Ganges. Directing her polemics against western science and Christianity, Blavatsky offered instead the distilled essence of ancient faiths. Yet Theosophy never abjured the language of science, describing itself as 'the science of the spirits'. Its importance for India lay in the publicity it gave to Indian spirituality in the West. For a while the society was even keen to join forces with Dayananda's Arya Samaj.³⁶ Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott travelled the length and breadth of the subcontinent telling Indians what they had to offer the world; everywhere they were received with acclaim. Madame Blavatsky managed to convert the Congress leaders, Allan Octavian Hume and Gokhale, if only temporarily.

Madame Blavatsky's death in 1891 diluted the esoteric nature of Theosophy, enabling its entry into Indian politics; this was due largely to Annie Besant. Blavatsky's triumphal journey in the Aryan heartland was repeated in 1893 by Mrs Besant. The erstwhile British feminist denounced western materialism in countless lectures, coining the memorable phrase, 'India's spiritual mission to the world'. She won unprecedented popularity among Indians.³⁷ Valentine Chirol, a pro-Raj journalist, seeking to unravel the roots of *swadeshi* violence, credited her with giving the Hindus an aggressive confidence in their culture.³⁸ Mrs Besant embraced the Hindu way of life, distinguishing Aryan Hinduism from its 'corrupt' modern version. Even though orthodox Brahmins were reluctant to dine with her for fear of pollution, they welcomed the prospect of an orthodox revolt led by her.

The year 1893 marks the triumph of Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The convention, meant to be the crowning event in the World's Columbian Exhibition, sent out invitations to thirty countries. India, the 'mother of religions', was well represented. As the convention brochure put it, she sent C. N. Chakravarti, the metaphysical Theosophist, P. C. Mazoomdar, a Brahmo and 'a master of eloquence', Vivekananda, the orange monk who 'exercised a wonderful influence over his auditors', the 'keen and courageous Nagarkar', the attractive Narasimha and finally, the acute, philosophical Gandhi (not the Mahatma). Swan¹ Vivekananda had been sent to the Parliament with funds raised by the Hindus of Madras. For the first time an Indian was defending Hinduism to the world:

Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation.

So wrote *The New York Herald*. The Swami's triumphal progress continued all the way back to India. In Britain, a young Froebel-trained

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Irish teacher, Margaret Noble, fell under his spell and joined the Order of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. Arriving in Calcutta in 1898 to teach at a girls' school, she identified herself totally with Hindu nationalist aspirations. At a moving ceremony she was named Nivedita (the dedicated). Vivekananda's frenetic energy was burned out by 1902, his thirty-ninth year; but within these few years not only had he won European converts, but had become the idol of Hindu nationalists.⁴⁰

THE IDEOLOGUES

By 1900 the spiritual image of India as the counterpoint to European materialism was complete, nourished by western adulation and a new perception of her historic past. During this age of Hinduism triumphant, the war against missionaries was carried right into the heart of the enemy territory. Art gained indirectly from this and more directly from three champions of Indian art who appeared from the West: Ernest Binfield Havell (Figs 135, 136), Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy; Utopian critics of industrialism, they gave a sharp edge to *swadeshi* ideology, elaborating the spirituality of Indian art as the antithesis of Renaissance naturalism. The doctrine took shape between c. 1896-1910, though the final versions appeared later. Havell plunged into artistic reform soon after his arrival in Calcutta in 1896. Nivedita joined in discussions on art. Coomaraswamy did not however make his mark until the Bengal School of painting was well established. The three ideologues - Havell, Nivedita and Coomaraswamy - seemed to speak with one voice. Only later did the intellectual differences become evident. Havell furnished the aesthetic, Nivedita the moral and Coomaraswamy the metaphysical content of the *swadeshi* doctrine, Nivedita was the most fiery, Coomaraswamy the most persuasive, but Havell was the most systematic critic of naturalism. His years of experience as an art teacher were brought to bear on the practical aspects of the *swadeshi* doctrine.

'Gesamtkunstwerk' and E. B. Havell

Part of the uniqueness of Havell's art teaching lay in the single-minded pursuit of his deeply-held beliefs. At the same time, being of a remote disposition, Havell was incapable of forming close ties with his students, ruthlessly crushing all opposition to his ideas. Nor was his esjusal of the useful arts particularly new; it already formed the main plank in Raj policy. Kipling and other teachers were no less committed to them. Havell never questioned the existence of the empire; he simply had no faith in the 'dead hand' of the Indian bureaucracy, against whom, especially against the Public Works Department, he Waged a life-long

war, And yet, he expected the same bureaucracy (to which, after all, he belonged) to lead artistic revival in India.

A paternalist, Havell dreamed of an ideal Aryan empire, where bureaucrats, like the legendary Chinese mandarins, would act as friends, philosophers and guides to artist-artisans. This view was communicated to the Congress in no uncertain terms; even though his optimism was not shared by others. As early as 1901, in *Art and Education in India*, he had insisted on art appreciation as a duty rather than a pleasure. Havell's dour moralistic view of art informed his obsessive attacks on those who merely enjoyed art. His faith in state intervention in art education was endorsed by the London art conference of 1908. The meeting agonised over the English artisan's loss of aesthetic commitment; what went for the working classes was also true of the subject nations.



135 Left E. B. Havell:
Landscape, oil

136 E. B. Havell: *Decorative Design*, watercolour? This was used by him for teaching purposes at the art school. Calcutta



THE GREAT WAVE OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM

In 1893, Havell was commended by Birdwood, Secretary, of the Society For the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art (London), for his 'great success in superintending the Madras School of Art where [he] had uniformly upheld the traditional patterns of Indian workmen. weeding out of their designs the Western influences [which] sometimes pervade their work' Havell was doing no more than pursue with vigour Birdwood's plans for Indian decorative arts. In 1896 he arrived in Calcutta, intent on putting the same principles into practice. He immediately showed his mettle in turning art-school issues into wider political ones, a flair welcomed in nationalist Calcutta. What he did not foresee was that his involvement with cultural politics would take him away from the artisans for ever.

The turning point at the art school came with Havell's unfolding of his plans, which differed considerably from those of other policy framers, including Birdwood. The clue to this difference is to be found in a passage in William Morris:

I shall not meddle much with the great art of Architecture, and still less with the great arts commonly called Sculpture and Painting, yet I cannot in my own mind quite sever them from those lesser, so-called Decorative Arts, which I have to speak about: it is only in latter times and under the most intricate conditions of life, that they have fallen apart from one another; and I hold that, when they are so parted, it is ill for the Arts altogether: the lesser ones become trivial, mechanical, unintelligent . . . while the greater . . . are sure to lose their dignity of popular arts . . ."

Morris' vision of aesthetic unity was germane to Havell's doctrine that obliterated the distinctions between fine and decorative arts. Havell, like Kipling, was a product of South Kensington, and yet only he and not others was able to challenge the Victorian hierarchy that regarded articles of domestic use as inferior to the high arts. Birdwood's tragedy was that, for all his romantic attachment to the village arts of India, he could not cut himself loose from his Classical moorings. It was only by questioning Renaissance naturalism that Havell was able to see medieval European and Indian art with a fresh eye. One of the new generation of anti-Classical critics, Havell's insight into medieval European art, a non-Classical tradition, uniquely qualified him to inspire cultural nationalism in India. At his Royal Society of Arts lecture (1910), he reiterated his conviction that 'the aesthetic philosophy which controls the weaver's fingers is the same as that which controls the painter's brushes and the sculptor's chisel'.^{*4} This was the fateful meeting where Birdwood refused to consider Indian art on a par with Classical art, leading to his breach with Havell.

In *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908), Havell eloquently expounded the future of Indian art. But his blueprint for artistic nationalism, 'The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India', first appeared in *The*

Hindu, the south Indian newspaper, in 1912. Published at the height of the *swadeshi* unrest, it summed up his years of teaching experience. His starting point, as with all heads of art schools, was the revival of handicrafts, a question examined by the government in 1875 and 1890. Havell pleaded for a return to the pre-industrial mode of production, denying vehemently that Indian handicrafts were dead. Havell's ideas were entirely Morrisian: western societies had become slaves to the machine; the machine had not improved craftsmanship, it had merely brought down the price of textiles. A non-industrial society, India could still escape the fate of the West by a sensible government policy. Indian artisans, after all, were incapable of becoming 'cogs' in the machine.

These ideas make clear Havell's qualified opposition to the machine, similar to Morris's selective resistance to the machine age (and his allergy to steam power). The machine, in Havell's view, destroyed individual skill when used indiscriminately, in India, 'a handworker's paradise', improved methods and labour-saving devices would not impair the quality of products, nor lead to wholesale industrialisation. Havell's campaigns convinced the Indian elite of the importance of Indian handicrafts, especially the improved handloom. He even presented a British spinning wheel to Abanindranath's mother. She, like many an upper-class woman during the *swadeshi* era, felt obliged to take up spinning. If all this sounds familiar, it was Havell who introduced the improved 'fly shuttle' loom in India in 190s. His cult of the spinning wheel came to fruition in Gandhi's vision of intermediate technology.⁴⁶ Havell drew attention to the handicrafts at the Congress exhibition of 1901, praising the journal *Indian Mechanic* for its imaginative display of Indian products. While the Hindu Mela of 1868 was the first to focus on handicrafts, their presence in the Congress session of 1901 signified the growing political importance of economic self-sufficiency. Initially concerned with political rights, pressure from different groups forced the Congress to turn to economic matters.⁴⁷

Birdwood had been exposing the plight of the applied arts since the 1860s, as Havell acknowledged. But Havell's originality lay in his overarching vision of the arts, crowned by architecture, in an ideal community. If the revival of handicrafts was not possible, argued Havell, in a society that denied a genuine function to them, where decoration was not integral to architecture. It was architecture that afforded the artists a unique opportunity for decorating a building, both within and without. An inspired vision of living space, part Victorian and part Indian, was behind Havell's ideal building: it had relief sculpture on the outside, paintings on the interior walls and everyday objects, useful and elegant, lay tastefully scattered in the rooms. This was also Morris's vision of architecture, the mother of the arts: a 'union of the arts mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated to one another'.⁴⁸ Inevitably, Havell turned to frescoes as the mediator between fine and decorative arts in the

greatest periods, unlike the unintelligent modern 'craze for cabinet pictures'.

I call Havell's unified vision of Indian art the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal, a word coined by German Romanticism. The term reflects the widespread concern with the unity of the arts in the late nineteenth century, as seen for instance, in the frescoes of Puvis de Chavannes. In Britain, under its influence, architects and painters collaborated in decorations of public buildings. A *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal informed Havell's writings on two levels: it taught him to approach ancient Indian art with imagination; this insight was then transferred to the role of art in modern Indian society. Thanks to Havell, one learned to read the Hindu temple as a complex synthesis of fine and applied arts. Of course his insight is unimaginable without the Arts and Crafts Movement and his discovery of medieval art. But Havell saw Hindu architecture as an embodiment of a hierarchical principle of decoration, from the simplest abstract ornaments to large figure reliefs. So to view the sculptures in isolation was to miss the point. Every aspect of temple decoration was infused with a 'spiritual' principle that gave unity to the architecture. It was a small step to Havell's volumes on Hindu art as the coherent expression of a culture. Perhaps today we are no longer taken aback by his description of Hindu sculpture and painting as fine arts, but in 1908 it shocked English critics.⁸¹ Lacking such a synthesising vision, earlier teachers had tacitly accepted the low level of Hindu sculptures, concentrating on the 'useful arts' in expectation of an artistic revival. Havell's description of Indian painting and sculpture as fine arts was predicated on dissolving the fine/useful art distinction. Nothing brought down the Renaissance go on from its pedestal more easily than the insistence that all art was useful. This fresh outlook encouraged art students to take pride in Indian achievements, for the *bhadralok* artists could not participate in a revival that smacked of artisanal products.⁵²

Havell's predilection led him in 1901 to trace the cultural rot in India to alien architecture. While the British filled colonial cities with Neoclassical, Neogothic and other 'historicist' styles, the westernised Indians in their turn aped their rulers in their home. The final nail in the coffin was the *bhadralok* mania for Victorian bric-a-brac. Genuine Indian architecture could be revived, Havell insisted, only by employing the surviving Orissan builders and other traditional masons. The artisans would also benefit from this, since a building was a 'school' for sculpture and painting. This faith in architecture as a pivot in nation-building prompted Havell to joust over an appropriate style for the proposed capital in Delhi, announced at the Durbar of 1911. The art teacher, who viewed Mughal as the true Indian imperial style, campaigned tirelessly in favour of Indian builders. The Classical style, envisaged by Sir Edwin Lutyens, would deny Indian craftsmen the economic and cultural recovery. Architecture was so central to Havell's thinking that in 1913 he even felt that the

Mughal style would bring the British and the Indians together in a period of grave unrest.

As Morris made art the centre of communal life, so Havell's holistic primitivism condemned the detached connoisseurship of colonial culture. Despairing of the Indian elite, whose corrupt taste dismissed Indian handicrafts as old-fashioned, he turned to the peasant as the embodiment of the true artistic instinct (Havell's simple uncorrupted peasant was pure Ruskin). Art was not for the wealthy; nor was it for pleasure. Commercialism had taught the *bhadralok* to enjoy art but to ignore its religious function. Havell urged the Congress leaders in 1901 to take a broader perspective and integrate art more fully into their national programme.

The Italian Renaissance was at the root of modern connoisseurship and of artistic corruption, a topic hotly debated at the London Conference of 1908. In 1903, Havell had published his 'Open Letter to Educated Indians' rebuking them for their indifference to their own art. There European art was categorised into three: spiritual (Middle Ages), intellectual (Renaissance) and material (post-Renaissance). Artistic decline came in the seventeenth century, heralding the insincere art of the eighteenth and finally, the materialist art of the nineteenth. But the germs of decline went back to the Renaissance when art ceased to be a communal art. The English-educated in India had succumbed to this western 'connoisseurship', losing sight of the spiritual in Indian art.

Education in crisis and Havell's remedy

The more Havell came to see the communal role of architecture as a 'facilitator' of other arts, the less, he distinguished between temple sculptures and humble village utensils. If the western-educated were to accept art as part of everyday life, they had to be re-educated, a belief that took Havell out of the art school cloisters into the wider arena of colonial education; only an educational overhaul could revive the traditional arts. The impending crisis in the education system with its English literary curriculum strengthened Havell's hand. He was not surprised by the crisis, it merely vindicated him. The crisis in education stemmed partly from colonial policy. Perhaps nowhere in Asia was western literacy more welcome than in Bengal. In 1835, the Raj introduced higher education in English in order to fill the lower end of the bureaucracy. By mid-century, English education had become a • passport to jobs. But even after government subsidy was reduced, English education continued to expand, as private colleges set up by Bengalis mushroomed. The reasons for the popularity of English in the province were both economic and a genuine excitement in the new world of European learning, its material and social sciences and its wealth of literature.

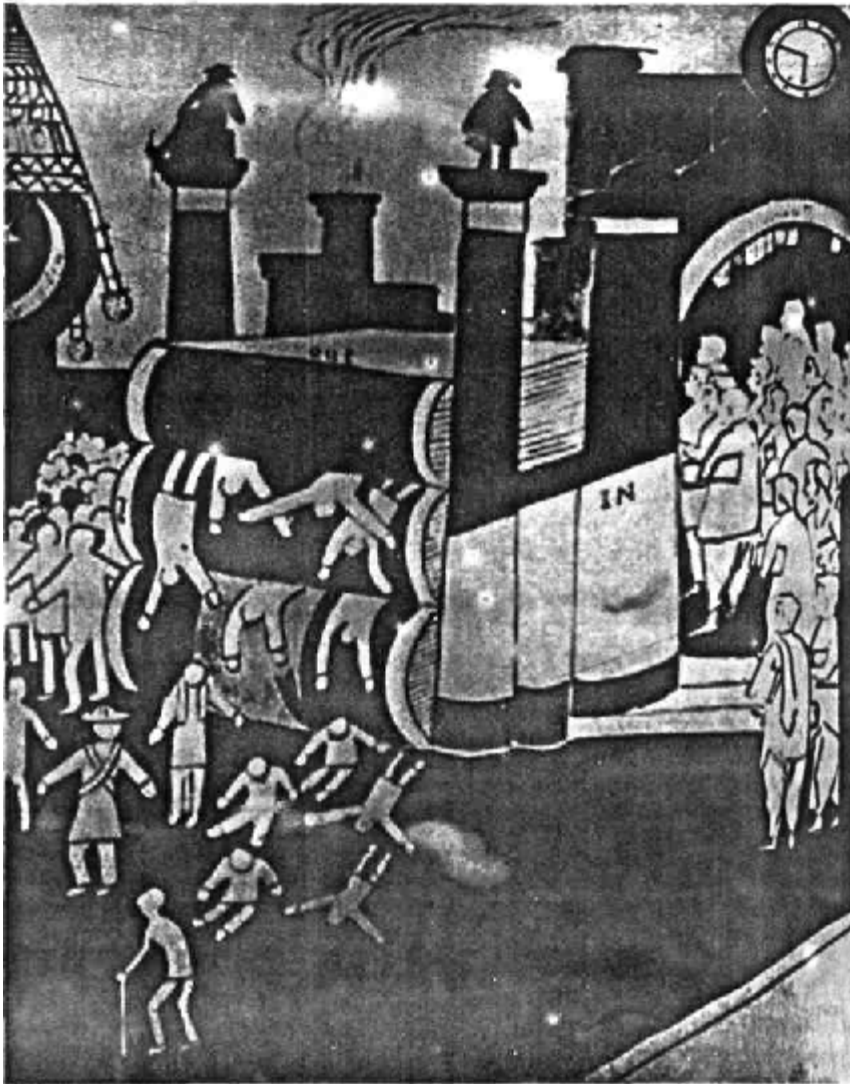
But enthusiasm for English education turned sour when opportunities did not match expectations. Since education did not automatically lead to equality with the British in India, its practical value was questioned. Waning optimism about westernisation also reflected a new militant 'Aryan' Hinduism as expressed by Tilak for instance in his 'Arctic; Home of the Vedas'. The education system lost favour not only with nationalists but with the Raj as well. As the demand for English education outpaced supply, claimed Valentine Chirol, standards fell precipitately. The student became a cramming machine; success in examinations promised an opening in the imperial bureaucracy. When this was denied, and the failure rate was high, it created disaffection. In Gaganendranath Tagore's 1917 cartoon the Calcutta University 'factory' churned out graduates in thousands (Fig. 137).⁵⁷

Facing a growing demand for political rights, the Raj blamed the unrest on the easy availability of education. The 1901 education conference at Simla recommended higher pass marks to restrict student admission. In 1904, the Universities Act was passed to impose further control.⁵⁸ As for *swadeshi* nationalists, they voiced disquiet about an education based on an alien language, imprinting foreign literary values on the impressionable. This anxiety found a powerful advocate in Rabindranath, who had been spared a high-school education. In 'Shikhsar Her Pher' (1892), he accused colonial education of setting the young adrift culturally, starving their minds of creativity, which only a mother tongue could nurture. Since English did not spring from Bengali culture, it was not a fit vehicle for expressing a Bengali experience. It was only capable of producing clerks.⁵⁹

As the national education movement gathered pace, Annie Besant founded a 'Hindu' institution of higher learning in 1898. Through his periodical, *The Dawn* (1897), Satish Chanra Mukherjee campaigned relentlessly against the English medium of instruction and its literary bias that discouraged science and the practical arts. The boycott of colonial institutions in 1905- included the government-funded Calcutta University. Mukherjee's alternative institution, launched with some local support, failed. Ambitious students still regarded the Calcutta University as the path to success. The national education movement generated a little light and a great deal of heat.⁶⁰ Nivedita, Coomaraswamy and other influential figures worked closely with the Dawn Society founded in 1902 by Mukherjee. Havell wrote for *The Dawn*. In 1898, Birdwood, a patron saint of the Hindu 'renaissance', was approached by Mukherjee for advice on national education. Delighted, Birdwood hailed the 'spontaneous revival of the indigenous and traditionary, literary and artistic and philosophical and religious life of India - India of the Hindus'.⁶¹ They were urged to be self-reliant in education and to cultivate Sanskrit and the vernacular, hitherto neglected by colonial institutions. His more eccentric advice was on English. If it were to be retained, it should be approached

through Greek and Latin, and solely for private pleasures, such as reading the poets and 'the authorised [not revised] version of the Bible'.⁶² In 1901-2, Birdwood lectured on the Hindu Aryan revival in Bombay, which *The Dawn* duly printed. To Birdwood art was the lynchpin of national regeneration.⁶³

First drawn into the education controversy in 1900, Havell came out in 1903 against the neglect of aesthetics by the DPI. The cause of student unrest at the Calcutta University was traced to its barrack-hke structures and a cure proposed: a pleasing environment as in Oxford or Cambridge would infuse a sense of beauty in students and turn them away from violent politics.⁶⁴ The locus of Havell's ideal education was ancient Greece



137 Gaganendranath Tagore:
The University Machine,
lithograph

which may appear inconsistent with his outspoken anti-Classicism....Yet as a Victorian, he could not deny the value of a Classical education. Philology and the Greek revival created a romantic vision of the Hellenes fiercely moral in their sublime innocence, as was the Doric column, the emblem of rugged sincerity. Dr Arnold of Rugby equated the Greeks with godliness, later writers with veracity, athleticism and public-school virtues. Elsewhere in Europe, as in Germany for instance, the Greek serenity informed the concept of *Bildung*. With a sentiment worthy of Winckelmann, Havell accused the British of losing the Greek moral idea in art. In 1912, he praised ancient Indian education for its purported similarity with the Greek, something that was absent in British pedagogy-⁶⁵

Nonetheless, English public-school education to Havell was sterile in its lack of art. 'At a time when our national education was miserably defective, and when our own national art had lost its vitality and sincerity', wrote Havell, 'we undertook to hold up the torch of European civilisation and progress to the East.. . The rank materialism which is the basis of the modern Indian university system tends to produce in the Indian mind the same attitude towards art that is characteristic of the European university man'.⁶⁶ The same mentality spawned both Ravi Varma and his admirers. Havell's remedy was to restore art to national as well as student life by including it in the Calcutta University curriculum. Drawing was already part of school courses but the idea of art within a liberal university education was novel. Mounting political unrest, as we know, was diagnosed by the Raj as a failure of education, which had become divorced from 'indigenous' values. Hence it was imperative to restore these values. Curzon's support of Havell's work for the Indian arts reflects the fear about academic education breeding seditious politicians. Havell was invited to the Simla education conference of 1901. However, none of his measures was implemented. This, Havell claimed later, resulted in a failure to create an art awareness among university graduates.⁶⁷

Artistic nationalism according to Sister Nivedita

Nivedita's heady nationalism entailed less loyalty to the empire than Havell's. There 'can be no doubt', she declared, 'that some of the greatest art of the world, in many different ages, has been born of the impulse of Nationality'. Before embarking for India, she was warned' by Swami Vivekananda:

I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India ... Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of the misery, the superstition, and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a mass

of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste ... shunning the white skin through fear or hatred and hated by them intensely ... you will be looked upon by the white as a crank and . . . your movements will be watched with suspicion.⁶⁸

Nivedita remained a mentor of the Bengali artists until her early death. Havell's (and Coomaraswamy's) appeal was limited to 'the English-speaking Indians. Nivedita's essays translated from *Modern Review* touched a wider public, especially *bhadralok* women. Headstrong and enthusiastic, her personal magnetism affected those like Abanindranath who came in contact with her. She addressed India as 'our country', leaving all her personal effects to her adopted motherland. Her politics too was personal: Birdwood was the enemy and a poseur; allies were Havell, Coomaraswamy and the Tagores, even, though Rabindranath himself was ambivalent about her Nivedita's testament to nationalist art, published during the anti-Partition unrest, contrasted 'vicious theories of imperialism propagated by Curzon's 'school' with the 'Christian Socialism' of Lord Ripon. Nivedita's mentors were the Fabian Society and the Art and Crafts Movement.⁶⁹

In sympathy with Theosophists, who wished to unite Indian spirituality with western science, Nivedita argued that 'the destiny of Imperial peoples [was] to be conquered in turn by the religious ideas of their subjects'. Her language of resistance was that of the Irish Literary Movement. Compare similar ideas in Yeats about Ireland. Great art, she asserted, was not the product of an affluent and dominant society but was born of an agonising spiritual struggle. Its 'rebirth in India today can only take place, if it be consciously made the servant and poet of the mighty dream of an Indian nationality'. Imperial art was necessarily overripe and decadent, far better 'the crudeness of colour, with the agony of thought behind. Far better were the rudest drawing with the weight of symbolism heavy on the drooping eyelids of the humanity portrayed'.⁷⁰ To Havell's disclaimer that he could only teach techniques of art, not produce genius, her rejoinder was typical:

[the] essential ingredients [were] love of one's country, hope for the future, dauntless passion for India. These would make original genius out of Copyists.

Art was elevated to a spiritual level: 'the profession of the painter must come to be regarded, not simply as a means of earning a livelihood, but as one of the supreme ends of the highest kind of education'. So for art to flourish, the nation's freedom was essential. For its part, art must serve the nation with paintings on civic themes in public buildings. Havell's *Gesamttkunstwerk* architectural decoration was endorsed by her with a stern historic ideal dictated by an unflinchingly serious purpose. 'No mythic scenes should be allowed', Nivedita admonished, 'but only

famous events from ancient Indian history'. In keeping with the spirit of the time, religious temples were to be replaced with civic ones to the nation, in order to take up 'our connection with the past'. The exemplar was the civic humanism of Puvis de Chavannes, the painter of large public murals in Paris.⁷]

In Nivedita's heartfelt comments we learn what mattered to her in art. Even more than Havell, she made practical suggestions for creating a national art which moved Abanindranath and his pupils. She spoke on two technical aspects in particular: light was as important in painting as colour contrasts. 'I have seen', she wrote, 'many oil paintings of dull unlighted tanks lined by thatched huts, the whole overshadowed by heavy forbidding trees, painted in blue-green. Now these depressing renderings of depressing scenes . . . a single luminous torch . . . would have changed the whole, as by a stroke of miracle'. Her second lesson was the power of suggestion, which idea Abanindranath probably owed to her. Nivedita exhorted students to seek out picturesque scenes to paint, the beggars, the boatmen of the Ganges, the bashful young Bengali bride, without which 'the mere technical excellences of which you learn to prate in English schools are bone without flesh; they are worse than valueless'.⁷³

What Nivedita was offering here in all innocence are two central tenets of European art since Titian - the treatment of light and the power of suggestion. The strength of traditional Indian painting (especially Rajput), she failed to discern, lay not in such concerns but in the combination of pure colours in which the visual world played a contingent role. In India where 'the picture tells its own story', argued Nivedita, Ajanta was the best example of naturalism, 'as free and living in its enjoyment and delineation of nature as any modern school of realists'. If an Indian student was asked about European pictures, he would answer that truth to nature was their great attraction, she added. Approving of it, for the exclusion of nature would stunt Indian art, she proposed a marriage of the natural and the ideal. She identified several academic artists in Bengal who did precisely this. Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's painting, *The Churning of the Ocean*, impressed her as a genuine Hindu conception 'full of the the play of the strong and the grotesque on the one side, and equally strong, but noble and beautiful on the other, and the power and daring of the whole conception are undeniable'. Raychaudhuri's daughter, Sukhalata Rao, was also treated with sympathy. The 'correct' Hindu ideal of the two artists was praised; the style mattered less.⁷⁴

In the same breath, she engaged in *swadeshi* rhetoric that 'truth to nature' cast a fatal fascination on Indian students. On another occasion she expressed her preference for archaic Greek art to *Venus of Melos*. 'A picture is not a photograph, art is not science. Creation is not mere imitation', she declared. Sensing, however, the inconsistencies in her position, she contended that love of nature was not exclusively western

but universal. Alert also to the danger of giving quarter to the archaeologists who detected Greek presence in the best Indian art, She told them off: 'India was too sophisticated to require the Grecian voice'. The Indian 'language' of art was clearly seen in the 'carved stone doors of the Orissan, and the beaten silver of southern temples'. Since Indian art possessed its own language, she argued, the practice of training students in Gothic vocabulary, for instance, had proved counter productive, a view similar to that of Kipling and Griffiths. Nonetheless Nivedita had no doubt that Indian artists could assimilate lessons from the West without losing integrity, for there 'is such a thing as a *national* manner in art, and India needs only to add the technical knowledge of Europe to this manner of her own'

Such a need, she knew, existed in a moving painting based on the *Mahabhrata*. in Jaipur. She felt that the 'creator of this gambling scene would have known quite well what to do with a little added science about vanishing points and the centre of vision . . . but it would never have led him to sacrifice his beauty and purity of colour, nor his power of making of a picture a piece of decoration'. In other words, Indian art could be improved by western science. She was further reassured by a painting at the Calcutta Art Gallery that single-point perspective was not a European monopoly. Little did she know that the painting's perspective was derived -from European art.^{7*}

Nivedita's Victorian upbringing is revealing in its unconsciousness. She rejected Havell also on progress, for 'India is not, in matters of art, to hark back to old ways, and refuse to consider or adopt anything that is new'. Although Havell accepted a limited synthesis of the old and the new, artistic salvation for him lay in an unchanging tradition. As for Nivedita, she did not object to progress so long as it was in the right direction, that is, towards moral subjects. Thus she was. fully committed to improving Indian art with 'scientific' advances and welcomed 'the opportunity which the European conception of art [offered] to an individual artist'.⁷⁷ A great artist expressed himself in an individual 'language'; an art 'that is followed by a hereditary guild tends to an unending sameness, tends to be ridden by conventions, till at last the mind of the community revolts, and seeks new ideals'. Of course we know that individualism was precisely, what replaced the earlier artistic outlook in India. Nivedita dreamed of a modern national guild of Indian painters that revolved in a new freedom of imagination. Her guild was quite unlike the medieval one of Havell, for she was certain that the social clock could not be put back:

Art, socially considered therefore has in our time gone through a great transition in India. And just as in Europe of the thirteenth century, Giotto, the master-painter of similar transition, left us the highest culture of his period in his works... so now and always the artist becomes free from the conventions of the caste

A powerful presence in Bengal, Nivedita's artistic *obiter dicta* sowed confusion on three points: on progress, artistic individualism and naturalism. When Havell and Nivedita spoke on the need for a national language of art, they meant two different languages. To the art teacher, the artistic language of each nation was unique; in India that national language was a flat non-representational one. To Nivedita, naturalism was a mark of universal art because the 'absolutely beautiful is understood by all humanity'. If a national artistic language did not rest on style, which was universal and borrowable, what did it consist in? If she did not seek to restore traditional non-naturalist art, what was she after? The thrust of her argument makes that clear; it was the moral idea which 'must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way, [and] convey some feeling [that is] immediately comprehensible'.⁷⁹

The appeal of a national style lay in its lofty contest. Here, each of the salon paintings demonstrated a moral virtue. *Saint Genevieve Watching Over Paris* by the Frenchman Puvis de Chavannes was 'the finest expression of the civic spirit in modern art'. Richter's *Queen Louise Appearing Before Napoleon*, 'a noble and beautiful woman, a queen full of love of people and country, strong amidst reverse, sweet and patient under poverty', celebrated patriotism. Less clear is why Guido Reni's *Beatrice Cenci* also qualified. A Victorian favourite, it was a poem by Shelley, a photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron and had moved Dickens. Was it a 'feminist' symbol of fortitude, as displayed by this victim of incest?⁸⁰

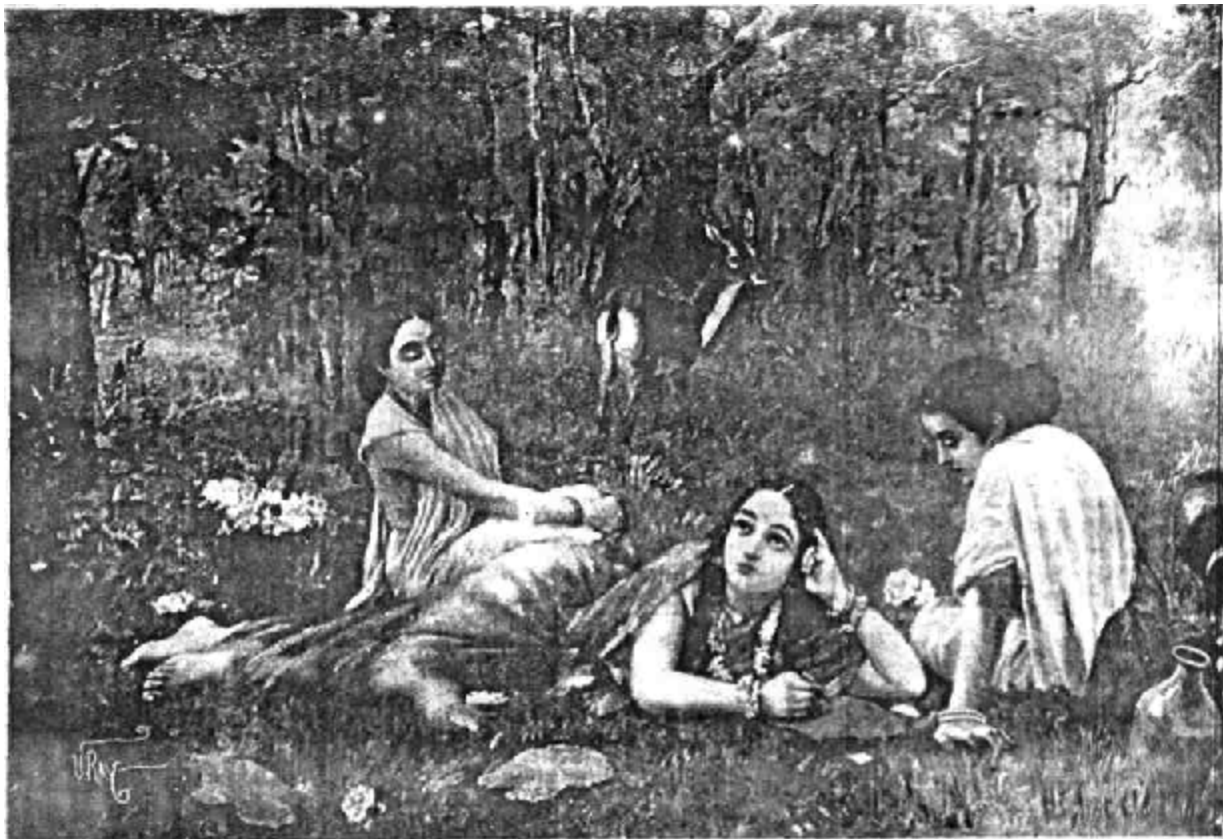
Nivedita's lesson for budding artist-patriots was artistic decorum: what could and could not be represented. Art must reflect 'the ideal of nationality, with its overwhelming impulse of moral direction and ethical stability'. Since women embodied this ideal, Ravi Varma's women were unsuitable for national art, her prime example being *Sakuntald* (Fig. 138). 'In a country in which that posture is held ill-bred [and nowhere is it decorous to stretch on the floor], every home contains a picture of a young woman lying full length on the floor and writing a letter on a lotus leaf, fulminated Nivedita. Nor did she spare the courting *Arjuna and Subhadra* by Varma. Present Indians, she pointed out triumphantly, did not favour such a public display of intimacy. A superior ideal was the Madonna. The only painter since the Renaissance who had succeeded in capturing the nobility of motherhood, she wrote, was P. A.J. Dagnan-Bouveret, a French salon celebrity. Again, it was the chaste mother in Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), that moved her, 'as she appears to the eyes of Her children . . . eternally virgin . . .'. In her modest homespun sari, she personified the motherland in her Bengali incarnation. Here was decorum: woman as the virgin mother rather than a temptress.⁸¹ Another perfect expression of this was Dhurandhar's *Steps to Devotion*. He was eulogised 'for the awe and rapture with which the artist regards the womanhood of his

motherland, and he fully convinces the beholder of the right to his worship', a picture full of correct piety, though containing some 'technical' faults.⁸²

The celebrated Victorian image of evangelical piety was Jean Francois Millet's *Angelus*, Nivedita's favourite picture. The French master had this message for Indian artists: 'there is nothing here that did not come to Millet straight from nature. Everything in the scene is a reproduction of fact. ... not as by the photograph, but as by the poet, the seer. It is nature and fact interpreted by the mind and the heart of a great man. It is realism. But it is also idealism'.⁸³ Nivedita had read the German art historian, Wilhelm Lubke, who considered the Frenchman, Millet and Jules Breton, 'two pointers of peasant life, who unite death of sentiment, truth of expression, simple naturalness, and broad, free handling of their subject, in a result of rare power'.⁸⁴

Nivedita "chose the above paintings in order to offer object lessons in idealism and cultural resistance, an idealism realised through artistic decorum. Her special gift to Bengali nationalists was pictorial evangelism, which inspired the landscapist Jamini Gangooly among others.

138 Ravi Varma: *Sakuntala*
Patralikhan, oleograph from
his oil



THE GREAT WAVE OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The intervention of the Avalokitesvara

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's Arts and Crafts credentials made him an ideal exponent of *swadeshi* nationalism as cultural resistance to the industrial society. His pronouncements sprang from an astounding self-assurance, as evident in a letter to a friend:

I want to serve not merely India but humanity, and to be as absolutely universal as possible - like the Avalokitesvara.

A 'cyclopean' giant in the Indian cultural revival, Coomaraswamy totally identified with the cause that he espoused at each stage of his life. Widely held as the finest scholar of Indian art, his eloquent defence of tradition was listened to with rapt attention by Indian nationalists and European critics of progress, notably C. R. Ashbee, Eric Gill, Walter Crane and other followers of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Arguably the only Platonist of our century, he was described by *Modern Review* as an 'uncompromising reactionary', more in compliment than in criticism.⁸⁶ Appearing at a time that western values were being questioned, he combined the best and the worst of that era. The brilliance of his wide-ranging discourses occasionally led to excesses; yet there was much that endured.

Mutu Coomaraswamy, his aristocratic Tamil father from Ceylon, married Elizabeth Clay Beeby, from a wealthy Kent family, while in England. A friend of Disraeli, Mutu moved with ease in high circles in Victorian Britain. In his son Ananda, born in England, the academic geologist yielded to the Indian nationalist, leading to the keeper of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Yet, these three phases of his career existed in 'hermetic compartments', each phase severing all links with the previous one.⁸⁷

His brief involvement with India is scarcely remembered but the years 1909-13 were as important for Coomaraswamy as they were for *swadeshi* nationalism. Arriving from London, he was a guest of the Tagores in Calcutta. Coomaraswamy plunged headlong into the national education movement, addressing the Dawn Society on national art with aid of a magic lantern, then a novel practice. Coomaraswamy drove home Havell's message with ferocity, the prophet's mantle resting securely on his shoulders. When Coomaraswamy's *Essays in National Idealism* (1911) came out, *The Dawn* hailed it as marking a new era in Indian nationalism. A romantic conservative, Coomaraswamy aimed at reviving 'the true Hindu ideals', greeting women's emancipation and feminist opposition to *sati* with disdain. The savant's diagnosis of the national *angst* as a Hindu one was symptomatic of the growing exclusion of Muslims from the *swadeshi* movement.⁸⁸

* A name of the Buddha as epitomising universal compassion.

Coomaraswamy endorsed the cultural nationalist view that the *swadeshi* protest was not merely political, nor was it a personal vendetta against individual Englishmen; it was a spiritual struggle against an alien ideal. Artists with their deeper sense of political wrongs and their longing for self-realisation were the true nation-builders. Coomaraswamy took to task the political activists for their indifference to Indian art while they condemned Curzon. Curzon, he reminded them, had shown more concern for the national heritage than they ever did. Coomaraswamy had in mind Curzon's statement in 1900, 'I cannot conceive of any obligation more strictly appertaining to a Supreme Government than the conservation of the most beautiful and perfect collection of monuments in the world in *Art and Swadeshi* (1912), Coomaraswamy drew attention to the *swadeshi* shops that continued to sell English products, insisting that a genuine *swadeshi* outlook was the only alternative to colonialism. Within a decade, Gandhi was to base his *satyagraha* on a similar rejection of western values, with the difference that his cultural resistance did not eschew political activism.⁹⁰

Coomaraswamy traced the collapse of Indian taste to the art schools, those factories for producing effete art. There was the embarrassing problem of Ravi Varma however, the academic artist who won the hearts of thousands, simple and sophisticated. A demolition job on the hero of academic art was called for. Confessing an ignorance of his works in the original, Coomaraswamy accused Varma of pandering to public weakness for the sentimental and the comprehensible. This was elucidated with two contrasting images of the epic heroine, Sita Varma's *Sita in Exile* was a woman bullied by her captor, while Abanindranath's was the 'embodiment of a national ideal'. The Keralan painter was guilty of a gross, physical treatment of symbolic subjects. In the case of the goddess Sarasvati for instance:

the lotus seat. . . essentially an abstract symbol ... is represented as a real flower . . . [one wonders] how the stalk can be strong enough to support a full grown woman ... I say 'woman' advisedly because Ravi Varma's divinities, in spite of their many arms, are very human, and often not very noble human types. At best the goddesses are 'pretty', a stronger condemnation of what should be ideal religious art it would be hard to find."

Varma's Sarasvati does not in fact sit on a lotus, but this minor detail got lost in the force of nationalist rhetoric. The eminent critic acknowledged Varma's Indian themes as the first steps towards national art, but an 'opportunity ill used'. Had the westerniser been more imaginative, his influence would have been that much greater. The works in short lacked decorum. Coomaraswamy's 'decorum' had a different ring to Nivedita's: the treatment should be commensurate with the subject chosen; thus the unrestrained 'melodramas' of Varma were inappropriate for the sacred

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epics. Flaying with local colours (Kerala and Maharashtra) and lacking in Indian feeling, the paintings seldom reached true national heights. His gods and heroes, cast in a common mould, found themselves in situations for which they lacked dignity. Since the national ideal demanded the treatment of noble subjects with dignity, Varma's paintings perpetrated the ultimate debasement of heroic and ideal types.⁹²

Varma's popularity was not held against him. Coomaraswamy blamed it on the spectrum of Indian taste 'from the Raja whose palace built by the London upholsterer or imitated from some European building is furnished with vulgar superfluity and uncomfortable grandeur, to the peasant clothed in Manchester cottons of appalling hue and meaningless design'." For this corruption of sensibility, Coomaraswamy pointed his finger at colonialism. It replaced hand-woven textiles with Manchester fabrics, grafted European buildings onto the cities, imposed art schools on craftsmen and, in a final betrayal, perpetuated a century of false education.

Pan-Asianism, Okakura and *swadeshi* art

Finally, Pan-Asianism, the Eastern form of the romantic ideology against progress, had a direct impact on Bengali artists in their perception of *swadeshi* art as oriental rather than Indian. By the end of the century, art teachers had begun to use oriental art to mean 'non-academic' art. But if *swadeshi* artists had tentatively accepted their art as oriental, they were thrilled to discover similar developments in Japan. With Okakura's arrival in Calcutta in 1902, they made common cause with Japanese artistic revival.

The processes of westernisation in Japan and India are comparable. This is significant since Japan was not spared European cultural dominance despite its political independence. In the last century, Japanese artisans were absorbed into industries, leading to social upheavals. Pragmatic reasons led Japanese artists to adopt illusionism and oils. The Japanese wished to master western technology, if only to avoid the fate of India and China. The Industrial Art School in Tokyo opened in 1876 under the Italian artist, Antonio Fontanesi. This was the Meiji era, a period of aggressive westernisation, when the educated were embarrassed to admit interest in Japanese art. The fashion for oils forced leading Edo artists 'to decorate fabrics and porcelain for export overseas. Some made a living painting pictures on fans'.

In the 1880s, traditional culture began to regain lost ground, assisted by the American, Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), and his Japanese disciple Kakuzo Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913). Fenollosa read philosophy and art at Harvard, where he discovered Carlyle and Ruskin. While teaching western philosophy in Japan, he discovered the ancient Japanese heritage.

His Pan-Asianist journal *Golden Age* held up Asian spirituality as an antidote to European commercialism and materialist Renaissance art. The activities of Fenollosa and Okakura remind us of Havell and Abanin dranath.

Okakura Tenshin was descended from a Samurai family that had taken up trade; the Brahmin Tagores had entered the modern business world. Okakura had a Christian missionary and Buddhist education. A student of Fenollosa at the university, Okakura joined him in documenting the Buddhist art of Japan, tracing it back to Ajanta. Their artistic revival was publicised in Okakura's influential magazine *Kokka*. In 1882 a bitter struggle broke out between Okakura and the pro-western factions. In 1888, as director of the imperial art academy, Okakura banned instruction in western art and the state withdrew its support of academic painters. In the Kyoto show of 1893, the leading oil painters failed to sell a single picture. However, Okakura's victory was a pyrrhic one. In 1898, he was ousted by the pro-West faction, a development Okakura did not fail to publicise in *The Studio*; westernisation, he claimed, had gone too far in Japan. He formed the rival 'Nihon Bijutsuin' (Japan Art-Academy) with the dissidents.⁹⁶ He also widened the 'Pan-Asian' struggle by enlisting the support of like-minded Asians, Swami Vivekananda and the Tagores.

The challenge to western art teaching in Japan and India followed a chain of events. Theosophy, Slavophilism, and Arts and Crafts, had loosened Asian fatalism about European supremacy. Vivekananda projected Asia as the voice of religion, even as Europe was that of politics.⁹¹ Havell, Fenollosa and Okakura came to accept 'spirituality' as an exclusively Asian virtue. In this heyday of Hegelian *Zeitgeist*, nations, cultures and races were seen in terms of their unique essences. Matthew Arnold coupled the feminine Celt and the masculine Teuton, Yeats contrasted 'masculine' empires and their 'feminine' subjects. *The Edinburgh Review* made a less flattering distinction - the intellectual West and the emotional East, adding with a hint of irony: 'The worth to the world of the Indian spiritual instinct is a matter beyond calculation'.⁹⁸ A tendency to see in terms of polarity, which appealed to critics of progress, became enshrined in Pan-Asianism.

The Pan-Asian spirited-material polarity had a precedent in Romanticism, which thrived on the opposition between emotion and reason. Romantics, who saw the Age of Reason as fragmenting consciousness, idolised the 'harmonious' medieval community. Slavophiles too wished to replace individualism with 'the wholeness of spirit'.⁹⁹ These earlier contrasts reappeared as a spiritual/material one, as the spectre of the machine haunted the mid-century. The classic criticism of industrialism was Tönnies's concepts of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association), a living organism versus an artificial creation based on

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contract. Birdwood's own world was divided into henchmen of the Moloch (Manchester) and votaries of the Spirit.¹⁰⁰

The reasons for the favourable reception of Pan-Asianism in the West are not far to seek. Even though concepts like the Orient or 'the oriental mind' were less a product of Asian consciousness than of western stereotyping, they nevertheless provided a powerful focus of Asian aspirations. The perceived difference between Europe and Asia helped forge Asia-wide links which had enduring aspects. Tagore's school at Santiniketan encouraged the teaching of Asian cultures and the regular exchange of artists and scholars. Finally, despite the finality of the adage, 'East is East and West is West', Pan-Asianists did believe in the meeting of the two, though not as imagined by Kipling. Fenellosa dreamed of 'marrying' the spiritual, feminine Japan with the materialist, masculine Europe; the two halves would join in a higher world order. Vivekananda, in a true flight of Hindu syncretism, dreamed of a universal religion led by India. *The Religion of Man*, a late piece by Rabindranath, distilled his universal humanism. In 1901, when Tagore made the expected contrast between Hindu and European minds, he was heartened to read of a similar defence of China emanating from the mainland. Only later did he discover that its author was the Englishman G. L. Dickinson.¹⁰¹

Okakura arrived in Calcutta on 6 January 1902, intending to study Buddhist art in the original and to take Vivekananda with him to Japan. But the monk died that year. Okakura's *Ideals of the East*, published in 1903, was widely welcomed by Indian nationalists: he was the bearer of a Pan-Asian mission to unite Asia against western imperialism.¹⁰²

Rabindranath's nephew Surendranath, who was Okakura's host, has left us a delightful pen portrait of the savant. Okakura was solemnity itself, demanding, 'and what are you going to do for your country against the western capitalist mammon?' Suren could only mumble a feeble answer.¹⁰³ In her preface to *The Ideals*, Nivedita described India as the source of Asian unity in Buddhism, which was also 'the vast synthesis known as Hinduism, when received by a foreign consciousness-Okakura, she said, showed Asia not 'as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life'.¹⁰⁴ Okakura described Japanese art as a product of Asian culture, a continent sustained by Indian religion and Chinese learning. When India's inspiration dried up, it led to the impoverishment of Japanese art. The identification of Vedic philosophy by Havell as the source of Asian art was -in a similar vein. The Japanese victory in 1905, the year of the Partition of Bengal, caused a *frisson* among the *bhadralok*. An Asian nation had defeated Russia, a European power, however ramshackle. Okakura addressed his 'Brothers and Sisters of Asia' on Japan's awakening after the colonial 'night of Asia' (the volume was published in London). Unlike

many Japanese intellectuals who dismissed India as a subject nation, he paid a warm tribute to her for providing Vedic ideals that cemented Asian unity. His *Heart of Heaven* argued again that the art that flowed from India to China was not an isolated phenomenon. His ideal Asian thinker was the scientist Jagadish Bose, who sought the underlying unity of the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds.¹⁰⁵

Okakura and Nivedita left a indelible impression on Abanindranath, reinforcing his art movement as 'oriental' rather than Indian in its war against the western malaise. The West would never comprehend that creation was not imitation, Okakura assured him. Okakura, with his knowledge of classical Chinese, must have known the Chinese painter Xie He famous precepts. But significantly, his own six principles of art were not elaborated until after his arrival in Calcutta. This was when he learned from Abanindranath of a similar Indian doctrine, *Sadanga* (Six Limbs of Painting), as part of a commentary on the *Kama Sutra*. The apparent affinities between Chinese and Indian ideas left Okakura in no doubt about the flow of influence from India to the Far East. In 1915, Abanindranath published his own reading of *Sadanga*, which he duly compared with Xie He's canons.

The differences between Okakura's principles and the *swadeshi* doctrine are minor. Here I take only the similarities, especially those that aimed at reconciling the Japanese tradition with the western. Nivedita saw Okakura as a Japanese William Morris, his students as artists who 'attempt to possess themselves of a deep sympathy and understanding of all that is best in the contemporary art movements of the West, at the same time that they aim at conserving and extending their national inspiration'.¹⁰⁷ Okakura urged his pupils to unite the best of East and West, old and new, which were also Abanindranath's unstated aims. Historicism dominated *nihonga* (nationalist) art. At the 'Nihon Bijutsuin', Okakura stressed the importance of the past, while not neglecting artistic progress. Most important, whatever was taken from the West or from the past must blend with artistic personality, Although style was important, 'originality counts for even more'. Freedom and individuality kept 'the soul free'.¹⁰⁸ Nothing was more alien to traditional Japanese art than this assertion of artistic individualism. The *swadeshi* doctrine also quietly absorbed progress and individualism.

Okakura's last appearance in Calcutta was in 1913 when he journeyed to the ancient temple of Konarak with Abanindranath. This last visit was touched with melancholy that presaged his imminent death. Committed to Pan-Asian ideals, he returned to general neglect in Japan and the outright hostility of pro-western artists. There are his letters to Priyambada Debi Banerjee, a widowed niece of Rabindranath, with whom he had formed a romantic attachment. His epitaph addressed to her expresses a mood of quiet resignation:

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When I am dead,
Beat no cymbals, no banners display, Deep in
pine-leaves on a lonely shore, Bury me quietly -
her poem's on my breast.

On this visit Okakura is said to have remarked, 'When I was here ten years ago, there was hardly any contemporary art. Now I can see the promise. Perhaps when I come after another ten years, I would see much achievement. The shadow of the departed friends, Nivedita and Okakura, fell on Abanindranath's essay in *Bharati*:

to grasp how this ability to adapt showed itself in ancient times we need to discuss Asiatic art. In other words, it is essential to conduct a comparative study of the traditions stretching from Turkey to Japan, from the northern limits of the Tartar kingdoms of China at one end to the Southern ocean at the other. Then we must turn our attention to the manner in which Buddhist art had left its mark in a glorious unity of Asiatic art... If we visit China, or Japan, or the Turkish desert, we will find traces of inspiration from Indian relief sculpture. Wherever Indian art travelled, it left its imprint, and yet never despoiling the art of that country.

In other words, Indian cultural hegemony was not attended with 'exploitation', as was the case with European colonialism.